

# **Cultural Overview: Iraq**



**Information  
compiled by DEOMI  
Public Affairs**



# Overview

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- **Objective**
- **Background**
- **Ethnic/Religious Groups**
- **Gestures and Cultural Taboos**
- **Significant Cities/Sites**
- **Impact on the Warfighter**
- **Summary**



# Objective

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- **To further develop cultural/religious sensitivity and awareness**
- **To provide a balanced and historical perspective of the Iraqi culture**
- **To dispel stereotypes and promote commonalities in different peoples**
- **To address cultural/religious dimensions of operations**
- **To increase warfighter knowledge, confidence and competence**



# Background

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## Ancient Past

- Mesopotamia
- Al-Qadisiyah
- Abbasid  
Dynasty





# Background

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## Ancient Warriors

- Assyrians have a strong passion for war (1450)
- “We are Husayn’s men... we are the slave of the Imam; our name is zealot and our tribe is martyr” (Safavid Shah Ismail, 1501)
- Profession of Death...the proud, sacred military professional



# Background

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## Ancient Religions

- Religion was/is an individual, family, clan and national commitment
- Each religion has its own history, laws, traditions and prejudices
- The Qur'an says an "eye for an eye"





# Background

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## Culture Today

- **75% of the population is Arab, Kurds make up 15-20% of the remainder**
  - Smaller groups include Turkmens, Jews, Armenians and Assyrians (5%)
- **Arabic is the official language**
- **Muslims make up 96 % of population**
  - About 60 to 65 % of the Muslims are Shia, and the rest are Sunni
- **Christian sects make up 3%**
  - Nestorians, Jacobites, Chaldean and Syrian Catholics, Yazidis, and Mandaean Baptists
- **Jews 1%**

# Background

## Culture Today

- The family, clan and tribe are the basic units of society
- 150 major tribes and 2,000 smaller clans in Iraq
- 30-35 tribes control the country





# Background

## Culture Today

- Part rather than whole
- Fatalism
- Wish versus reality
- Extremism
- Paranoia



# Ethnic/Religious Groups

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## Shia Arabs (55-60%)

- Sedentary: City dwelling population located around Basra and in Baghdad
- Tribal: Covets the close clan bonds of other groups
- Culture: Historically oppressed, piety not politics is important
- Religion: Islam - Shia
- Leader: Looked to Iran for leadership and help
- Values: Religion first, self-rule and major stake in “new Iraq”





# Ethnic/Religious Groups

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## Sunni Arabs (15-20%)

- **Sedentary**: Urban population, recently controlled all of Iraq from a few provinces in north west part of country
- **Tribal**: Independent power brokers, professional class, family unit strength/identity
- **Culture**: Secular “ownership” of government (army, administration, security, intelligence)
- **Religion**: Islam - Sunni
- **Leader**: Chosen by community as a whole
- **Values**: Civil religion, devotion to Islamic law



# Ethnic/Religious Groups

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## Iraqi Kurds (15-20%)

- **Semi-nomadic**: Originally nomadic herders, now semi nomadic
- **Tribal**: Live in tribes near Dahuk, Mosul, Kirkuk and Sulaimaniyah
- **Culture**: Ethnically close to Iran, Kurdish once a dialect of Iranian
- **Religion**: Majority Islam - Sunni
- **Leader**: Clan chieftains resist subjugation by other nations, strong political unity of tribe
- **Values**: Individuals are loyal, fearless and dedicated to independent Kurdish state





# Ethnic/Religious Groups

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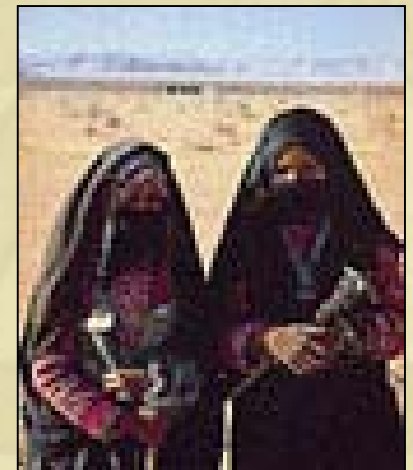
## Christian (3%)

- **Sedentary**: Highly urbanized, particularly dense population around Baghdad
- **Tribal**: No tribal or clan unity all ethnic groups represented
- **Culture**: Based on all Christian beliefs
- **Religion**: Chaldean Catholic, Assyrian Church of the East, Jacobite, Baptist, etc.
- **Leader**: Pope seen as leader for majority
- **Values**: Educated group with disproportionate influence on government

# Ethnic/Religious Groups

## Bedouin (2%)

- Nomadic: 'Sons of the desert'
- Tribal: Pride of genealogy and sense of who are by identification with a tribe
- Culture: Based on tight cohesive bond...moral code of group ethics
- Religion: Some tribes include Sunni, Shia and Christians
- Leader: Sheikh chosen by consensus of group
- Values: Freedom, kinship, courage, loyalty, generosity, truthfulness







# **Ethnic/Religious Groups**

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**Turkmen (2%), Armenians (1%),  
Assyrians (1%), Jews (1%)**

**These groups represent the  
descendants of ancient empires,  
groups oppressed by other  
cultures, refugees from  
neighboring countries and  
pilgrims emigrating to a perceived  
holy place**

# Ethnic/Religious Groups

## Marsh Arabs Ma'dan (0%)

- Sedentary: Subsistence, aquatic lifestyle
- Tribal: Close-knit clan/family
- Culture: More than 5,000 years old based on fishing, farming and reed gathering
- Religion: Islam - Shia
- Leader: Family head primary decision maker
- Values: Self-sufficient, mysticism, evil spirits dominate thinking/actions



*Marshlands were drained creating an environmental disaster*



# Ethnic/Religious Groups

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## Baath Political Party

- Originated with Syrians Michel Aflaq (Christian) and Salah Bitar (Sunni Muslim) in 1940s
- Party embraced the principles of unity, freedom, and socialism
- 1960s new beliefs based on patriotism, national loyalty, collectivism, participation, selflessness and civic responsibility





# Ethnic/Religious Groups

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## Baath Party (continued)

- The Iraqi Baath Regional Command Council (RCC) was supposed to make decisions regarding policy
- All decisions were made by the party Secretary General and Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein
- Following the coalition liberation of Iraq, the Baath party was dissolved along with its affiliate organizations

# Gestures/Cultural Taboos

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## Cultural Attitudes

- Recognize long-standing traditions
- Practice civility and respect
- Show kindness
- Practice humility
- Seek moderation
- Sincerity
- Remember honor and status





# Gestures/Cultural Taboos

## Greetings

- Small talk and ritual greetings
- Hospitality
- Body language





# Gestures/Cultural Taboos

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## Body Language

- Right hand leads
- Sitting
- Posture
- Outward displays of affection
- Thumbs up
- 'No'
- Pets
- Beads



# Gestures/Cultural Taboos

## Cultural Taboos

- Competition
- Dietary restrictions
- Communication
- Photographs
- Planning
- Cemeteries





# Gestures/Cultural Taboos

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## Qur'an Requirements

- Cleanliness
- Locations
- Covering
- Height on shelves
- Holders

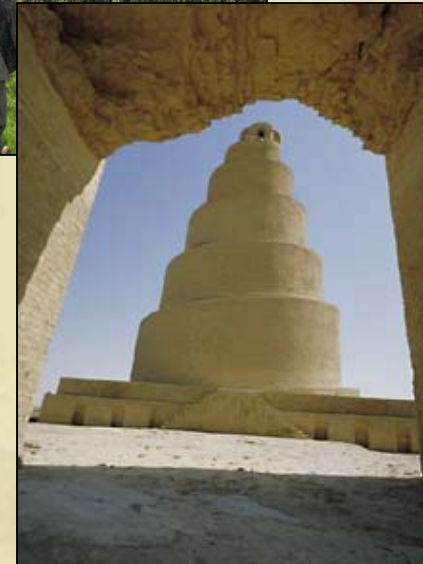




# Significant Cities/Sites

## Religious Cities

- Baghdad
- An Nasiriya
- Basra
- Tikrit
- Dohuk
- Halabjah
- Dirbuk
- Ar Ramadi



# Significant Cities/Sites

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## Holy Sites

- Samarra
- Al-Kufa
- An Najaf
- Karbala
- Al Kazimiyah





# Significant Cities/Sites

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## Archeological Sites

- Ninevah
- Ur
- Babylon
- Ctesiphon
- Al-Hadr
- Nimrud
- Nippur





# Impact on Warfighter

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## Operational

- Justice
- Educate personnel
- Warfighting
- Enemy
- Leadership with Arab counterparts
- Professional 'expertise'





# Impact on Warfighter

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## Operational - Validation

***“One need not embrace Islam to validate it. Validation does not say, ‘I believe what you believe.’ Rather it says, ‘I understand your religion is significant to you, and I respect the part it plays in your life. Because your faith is meaningful to you, I will regard it as important.’ Validation does not mean we concur with another on all points, but it does mean we treat kindly what that person holds dear even though we differ or disagree.”***

**CH (COL) Pete Christy**



# Impact on Warfighter

## Strategic

- Respect Islam
- Leverage moderate religious views
- Long term





# Impact on Warfighter

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## Tactical

- Educate Soldiers
- Awareness of 'watching world'
- Enemy propaganda
- Brutality of regime
- Sites and shrines
- Courtyards



# Summary

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# Questions?

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